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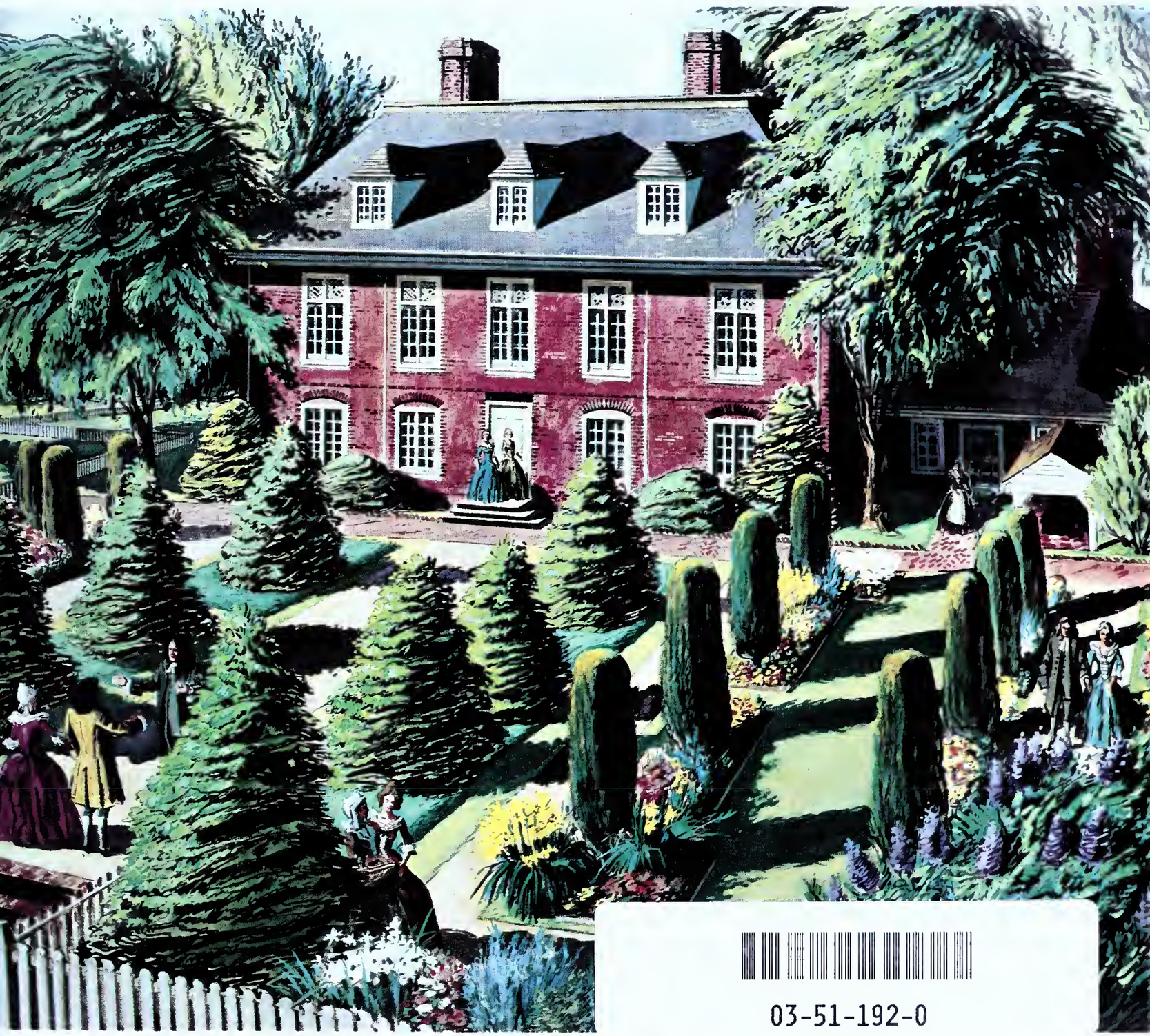
William Penn's Dream House

by Catherine Owens Peare



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DOCUMENTS SECTION

The Treaty of Friendship in 1682. Benjamin West's famed painting shows Penn winning the friendship of his Indian neighbors-to-be.

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

William Penn's Dream House

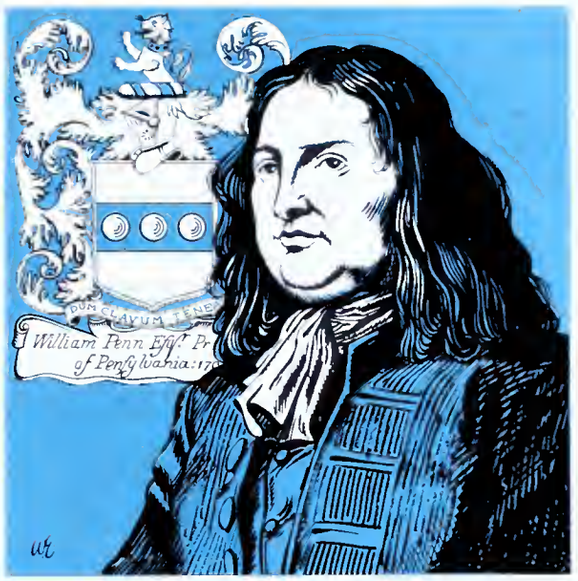
The founder of Pennsylvania loved beautiful Pennsbury Manor above all other houses—but he lived there for only two years.

By CATHERINE OWENS PEARE

PENNSBURY, like so many historic sites, was lost to posterity through neglect; but, unlike many others, it has been recovered for our permanent pleasure and inspiration. Painstaking research went into its restoration, and today the prim-fronted, three-storied, brick manor-house, rebuilt on the original foundations, stands once more on the point of land formed by the Delaware River between Morrisville and Bristol.

Its creator was a political personality of exceptional stature, ability and influence, in both Great Britain and on the Continent. William Penn was a front echelon leader—minister, writer and speaker—of the most extreme sect of the Puritan movement, the Society of Friends. He was also an active member of the newly developing Whig Party. Yet he was also close to the Stuart kings, so safely entrenched in their friendship that he could point out the error of their ways, advise them, even influence their decisions. Because of this exceptional influence he was able to rescue thousands of non-conformists from religious persecution in Ireland, France, Holland and Germany, as well as England.

The governmental structure of Pennsylvania was the zenith of his public career. He proved to be not only a gifted administrator but a man great enough to forego personal power. In his social experiment in the New World he signed away his almost absolute authority. He created a situation in which "the will of one man may not hinder the good of an whole country," and left himself "no power of doing mischief."



This was William Penn the prominent and respected public figure. But at Pennsbury another Penn is revealed. The whole estate—the buildings, the landscaping—affords us a deep insight into his personal tastes and habits. The original manor-house and surrounding tract of land was an expression of his most intimate taste, the environment where he hoped to spend a large portion of his life. The spaciousness of the rooms, the wide doorways, the many casement windows with their view of the countryside, all reveal Penn the visionary, the imaginative.

The great hall in the front of the house, large enough to accommodate whole delegations of callers, and the great room, or dining room, whose long board creaked under a plenitude of beef, mutton, pork, smoked shad, imported claret and madeira, home-made ale and cider, Indian corn and English peas, tell us that here was the open-hearted and hospitable Penn. The herbs drying in the bake-and-brew house: fennel, wormwood, leek, tarragon, spearmint, basil; the orchards—a peach tree between every pair of apples—and gardens, reveal Penn the epicure.

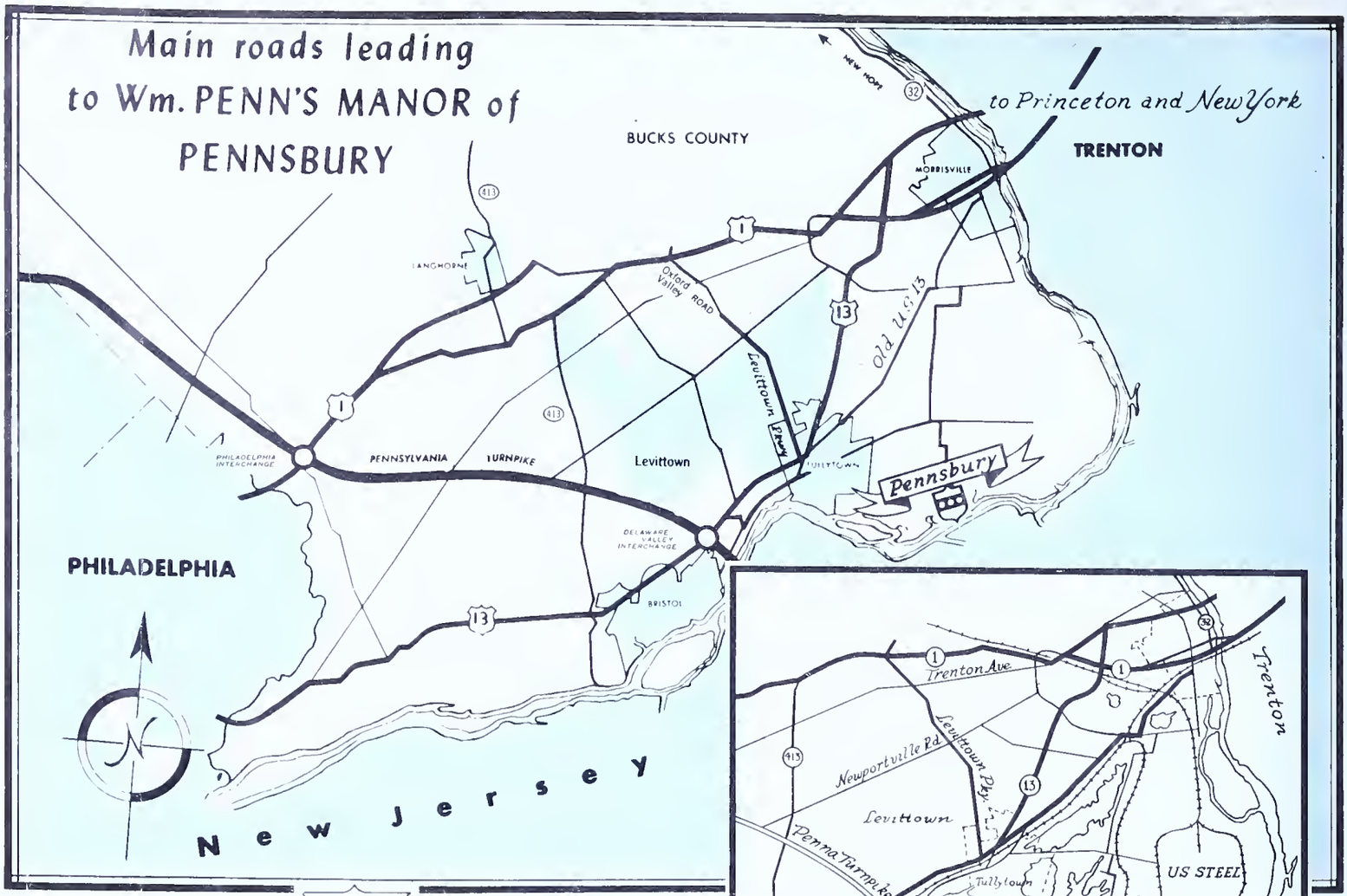
The promenade lined with poplars, mounting gentle terraces from the waterfront where his barge tied up to the front door of the brick mansion, suggests the aplomb and dignity of the traditional cavalier—the refreshing touch of elegance that frontier life needed. Most important of all, the peace and seclusion and withdrawnness of Pennsbury all say that here was the spiritual William Penn.

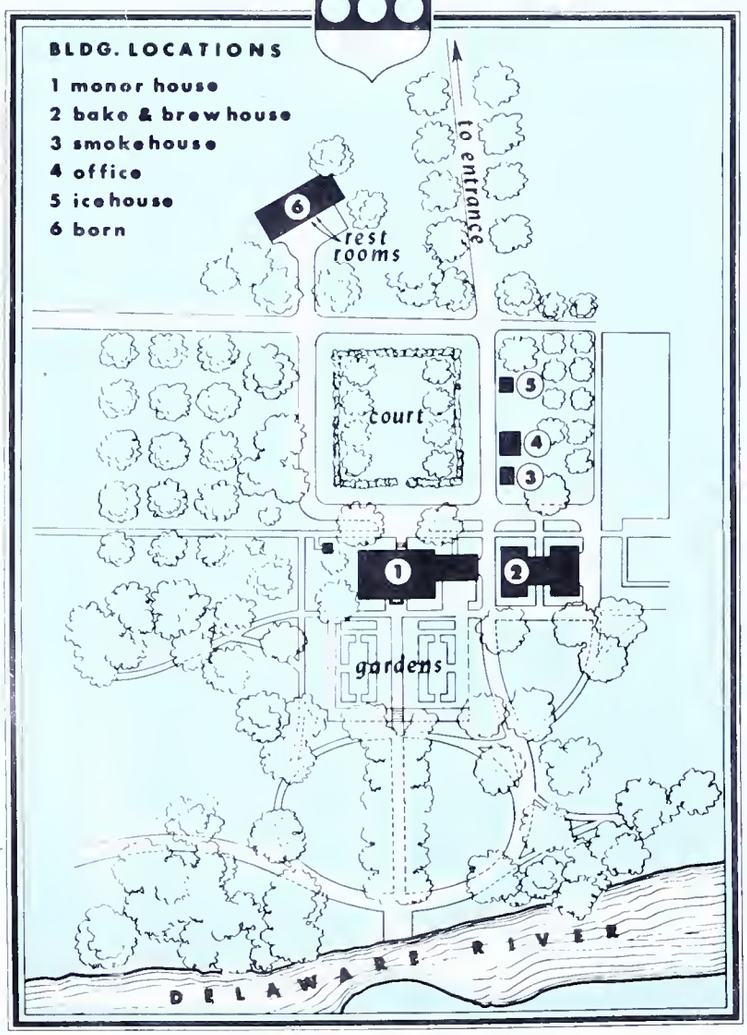
The site of Pennsbury was chosen by Penn's cousin and deputy governor, William Markham, many weeks before Penn's arrival in America. The land deed of July 15, 1682, was the first to be executed between Penn and the Indian Sachems. The purchase described in that deed was a vast tract: "all that land lying and being in the Province of Pennsylvania aforesaid beginning at a certain white oak in the land now in the tenure of John Wood, and by him called the Gray Stones [in Morrisville]. . .over against the falls of Delaware River, and so from thence up" the river for five and a half miles. . .then overland to the Indian village of Playwickey [near Langhorne]. . .and "from thence westward to the creek called Neshammony's Creek, and along by the said Neshammony's Creek unto the River Delaware."

It was paid for in currency of both America and Europe and in merchandise: 350 fathoms of wampum (nearly one-half a mile), 300 gilders, twenty white blankets, twenty fathoms of "strawd waters", sixty fathoms of duffields (coarse woolen fabric), twenty kettles, twenty guns, twenty coats, forty shirts, pipes, scissors, shoes, combs, hoes, tobacco, knives, two anchers (an ancher is about ten gallons) of rum, cider, beer. The manor-house and its cultivated lands lay within what later became Falls Township.

The home Penn planned was to be for himself and his first wife, Gulielma, then in England, preparing to follow him to America with children and servants. Construction on the house may even have begun before William Penn's arrival in October, 1682, and was well under way before circumstances forced him to return to England at the end of 1684. Before leaving America, Penn appointed James Harrison to be his overseer at Pennsbury, and wrote him letter after letter filled with detailed instructions, telling him to expect more servants, three carpenters and another gardener, to build "a kitchen, two larders, a wash house and room to iron in. . .a brew house, in it an oven for baking and a stable for twelve horses. . .Do what you can with bricks, what you can't, do with good timber and case with clapboards about five feet which will serve other things, and we can brick it hereafter. I would have the back door a two-leaved one and the front made from tip to bottom. . .I would have a rail and bannisters before both fronts. . .I hope the barge is kept safely from wind,

Front view of Pennsbury showing terrace, manor house, and bake-and-brew house.





Pennsbury Manor

The re-created country home of William Penn in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, provides a peaceful contrast to the hurry of modern American life. The construction of the original manor was an expression of Penn's belief that life in the country was more wholesome than in the worldly atmosphere of crowded cities. Pennsbury Manor is permeated with the spirit of this kindly, devout humanitarian, and it gives the visitor a sense of the unhurried grace and charm of those years when Pennsylvania was William Penn's "Holy Experiment."

The Manor was located with a view to convenient water transportation on the Delaware and consequently is off the major highways. It can be reached by the tourist by a short drive from U.S. 1, U.S. 13, or the Pennsylvania Turnpike by following the routes shown on the maps above.

Visiting Hours

8:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. Weekdays
12:00 Noon to 6:00 P.M. Sundays

Administered by

THE PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL AND MUSEUM COMMISSION
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

weather. . .I desire that a pair of handsome steps be made at the landing. . .The partition between the best parlor and the great room the servants used to sit in should be wainscoted with double leaved doors. The door had best be large between the other parlor and withdrawing room. . .I will send this fall divers seeds and plants. . ."

The turning tide of political affairs detained Penn in England for fifteen years, far longer than he wished to remain away from America, and left him dependent upon the trans-Atlantic mail service of the period to administer his colony and to complete his "beloved manor". Letters took many weeks to arrive, if they were not lost at sea. Rumor mongers tormented him with reports that Pennsbury was being allowed to go to rack and ruin.

During those years the Stuart regime fell and the Protestant Revolution placed William and Mary on the throne, leaving William Penn, close friend of the Stuarts, without a royal patron and even suspected of treason. For more than four years Whitehall harassed Penn with a cat-and-mouse treatment of questionings, detentions, embarrassments; he even spent two weeks in the Tower of London. Not until the end of 1693 was he fully exonerated.

"I am a man of sorrows," Penn once wrote, and it was certainly true; for scarcely had his name been cleared of the suspicion of treason than his wife, the beloved Gulielma, whose wishes no doubt influenced the designing of Pennsbury, died.

Another five years passed before William Penn was able to come once more to America. With him on his second trip in the fall of 1699 were his second wife, Hannah Callowhill, and Letitia, grown daughter of his first marriage. They took up their abode in Philadelphia, until the Pennsbury house could be put in order for them, but by June were able to travel up the Delaware River to Pennsbury Manor. With them went a new member of the family, John the American, the only one of Penn's children born in the New World.

Pennsbury was home for the rest of his stay in America. It was rather difficult to reach; the roads that existed were almost impassable except on horseback. The only comfortable means of travel was by water. Hannah became mistress of the lovely red brick mansion, and she and Letitia managed the place with an ample domestic staff.

The smokehouse and plantation office

Penn complained in July that his leg was out of order and swelled about the ankle, but it did not prevent him from making frequent trips to Philadelphia. James Logan, whom Penn had brought to America as his personal secretary, remained in town, acting as liaison, sending meticulous letters and reports to Pennsbury and carrying out endless instructions that Penn sent him, dealing with everything from governmental details to orders for household supplies.

The climate in America was a torment to those coming from the mild airs of England—heat, humidity and clouds of mosquitoes in the summer, penetrating cold in the winter. During that winter of 1700-1701 the Penn family endured a round of "colds and fever". Then Hannah did her utmost to keep her husband in bed and on one occasion she wrote to James Logan, "His sweating last night, something relieved him, but not so as to be capable of going to town without great hazard of his health, which has prevailed with him to stay till tomorrow."

For nearly two years Pennsbury was the scene of Penn's ample and diplomatic hospitality: to European and Indian, government men and their families, and to governors of other colonies.

Machinations in Whitehall that threatened to make Pennsylvania a Crown colony were the chief cause of Penn's return to England at the end of 1701. The thought of losing his personal administration on this side of the ocean was alarming. The Indians especially had taken him to their hearts, and an Indian could pay a white man no higher compliment than to tell him he was like William Penn. Before his departure the Delaware tribes, from "near a hundred miles around", gathered at Pennsbury "to settle our future good understanding", and to review their covenants. All was done "in much calmness of temper and in an amicable way". In reply to Penn's assurances of good faith one of the chieftains stepped forward to speak. The tribes had never broken a covenant with any people. He struck his hand on his head three times to show that they did not make covenants there but in their hearts, and he struck his hand on his heart three times. After they had settled their business there was an exchange of gifts and then a long, friendly conversation on their religious beliefs.

Since he fully expected to return to America, Penn wanted Hannah and Letitia to remain at Pennsbury, but Hannah flatly refused. She had had quite enough of the New World. He could not prevail upon her, even though he pointed out that all he had "to dispose of in this world is here for daughter and son and all the issue which this wife is like to bring me". If anything were left to be salvaged from his Irish or English estates it would go under the laws of England to the only surviving son of his first marriage. Letitia, too, was eager to go home.

Penn never saw America—or Pennsbury—again. Affairs at Whitehall, machinations of his English agent, Philip Ford, increasing poverty and the declining energies of old age all combined to prevent his return. But his son and heir, William Penn, Jr., was to make a visit to America and to live at Pennsbury.

Young Penn was weak and irresponsible, and the Proprietor sent

him to America to remove him from bad company in England and to give him a preview of his responsibilities.

"We shall be exceedingly glad to see Master William here," Logan assured Penn, "and, for my part, never be wanting in anything that may tend to thy or his interest and honor." Penn sent some specific instructions to Logan for his son's guidance: "Possess him, go with him to Pennsbury, advise him, contract and recommend his acacquaintance. No rambling to New York, nor mongrel correspondence."

Young Penn arrived in America in February, 1704, and did repair to Pennsbury for a while. In March a group of a hundred Indians, nine chieftains among them, called at Pennsbury to pay their respects to the son of the beloved Founder. They presented him with nine belts of wampum to ratify their peace treaties, and he received them with proper hospitality.

But Pennsbury was too quiet a place for the tavern-haunting heir, and he soon fled to the more vigorous town life of Philadelphia. Less than a year after his arrival, young Penn returned to England.

The letters exchanged between the Founder and James Logan continued to be filled with references to Pennsbury. Worried queries from Penn: "I hear not a word about land improvements at Pennsbury, but of divers of the declining condition of it, notwithstanding the money I laid out when there to help it."

Reassurances from the faithful Logan: "At Pennsbury John is very industrious. . .the plantation clears itself all but John's wages. . .they misinform who say the place goes to ruin." From Penn: "Let me not be put to more charges there, but only to keep it in repair, and that its produce may maintain it."

By 1707 Logan had to admit to Penn that the "place is in a decaying condition, although it is still lived in but by occupants who make nothing of it for themselves or for anyone else." For two years from 1707 the place was rented to Colonel Robert Quary for forty pounds a year, but a tenant was no substitute for the loving care of the Proprietor.

William Penn suffered his first stroke in 1711, and in the fall of the next year two more attacks rendered him incompetent until his death in 1718. The burden of administering Pennsylvania then fell upon his wife, James Logan and others. Their attention was necessarily diverted from the care of Pennsbury. The four seasons of the year worked their will with it and the lovely country estate fell rapidly to ruin.

Penn himself had not retained his whole grant but had portioned it out to others until his part was reduced to four thousand acres. After his death his heirs kept that much of the Pennsbury estate intact for a few years. But eventually the Penn heirs placed the property on the market.

All but 300 acres on which the main house and outbuildings stood then passed out of the family's hands. Richard Penn, grandson of William and Hannah, who served as Lieutenant Governor from 1771 to August 1773, purchased the remaining 300 acres before a return visit to England in the summer of 1775. He planned to build a home at Pennsbury, but the American Revolution intervened, and Richard did not see America again until about 1808, and then only for a year.

Meanwhile William Bell had acquired the 300 acres and in turn sold them to Robert Crozier in 1803. Crozier built a large frame farmhouse on part of the original foundation of the manor-house. The property changed hands several times after that, finally coming into the possession of the Van Sciver Corporation, which was ultimately combined with the Warner Company.

On Sunday, October 23, 1932, a touching and significant ceremony was held at Pennsbury. Charles Warner, President of the Warner Company, presented the deed for nine and eight tenths acres—the portion on which the buildings had stood—to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Dr. James N. Rule, Chairman of the Pennsylvania Historical Commission, accepted the deed. Dr. B. F. Fackenthal, Jr., of Riegelsville, President of The Bucks County Historical Society, gave the historical address. Joseph R. Grundy had been one of the persons who influenced the Warner Company to make its gift. The date of the ceremony commemorated the 250th anniversary of the arrival of William Penn in America, and it was hoped at the time that some kind of memorial park would result.

The manor house kitchen

The idea grew. The Pennsylvania Historical Commission engaged Dr. Donald A. Cadzow, archaeologist and anthropologist, to make excavations in search of the original foundations and to sift the earth for any authentic pieces and fragments of the home of the Founder. Dr. Cadzow's findings were rich: bricks, nails, hinges, window glass, pieces of casement, and the lovely delft tiles that frame the fireplaces. They were able, said Major Frank Worthington Melvin, Chairman of the Commission in 1939, to "know with sure precision about ninety percent of the material that composed the original structure". The Crozier house, meanwhile, had been removed to another location.

The Commission engaged R. Brognard Okie, historical architect. Okie in turn chose Dr. Warren P. Laird of the University of Pennsylvania as his consultant. Their task was to reconstruct Pennsbury Manor from archaeological evidence and from William Penn's many letters of instruction to James Harrison and James Logan.

The cornerstone of the manor house was laid in April 1938, and the buildings were completed in the summer of 1939. The next year the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania purchased another thirty acres so that the grounds could be landscaped and planted. This was done under the direction of Thomas W. Sears with meticulous accuracy.

The spirit of America's greatest colonizer is a very real presence at Pennsbury Manor, the direct result of the loving care and devotion of those who brought the estate back into existence.